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23 January 2006

IND100772.E

India: The security situation in Punjab, including patterns of violence, the groups involved, and the government's response (2002 - 2005)

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Overview

In its 2002 assessment of Punjab state, South Asia Terrorism Portal (SATP) concluded that Punjab state "remains largely free from terrorist violence for the ninth consecutive year," explaining that "the ideology of [an independent state of] Khalistan has lost appeal among the people of Punjab, and even public calls to revive secession and terrorist violence have faded out" (SATP n.d.b). This general atmosphere is reflected in SATP's South Asia Conflict Maps for 2003 and 2004, which do not include Punjab state as an area of "conflict" (SATP n.d.c.; *ibid.* n.d.d.). Similarly, according to a 2003 article by a research associate with the Institute for Conflict Management (ICM) in New Delhi, India, which is "committed to the continuous evaluation and resolution of problems of internal security in South Asia" (ICM n.d.a), anti-Sikh violence in Punjab state had been "settled" (IPCS 24 June 2003). *Les Nouveaux Mondes rebelles*, on the other hand, reported in 2005 that the Punjab state independence conflict was "on its way to being resolved" [translation] (2005, 358).

In articles focusing on the security situation in India for the time period 2002 to 2005, *Jane's Intelligence Review (JIR)* does not mention Punjab state. Rather, *JIR* articles focus on the activities of Maoist groups in northeastern and southeastern states of India, with no reference to militant groups in Punjab state (*JIR* Nov. 2004; *ibid.* June 2004; *ibid.* Aug. 2003). Similarly, while the *World Police Encyclopedia* discusses "terrorism" in India, it does not list Punjab state among those areas where terrorist groups are active in India (WPE 2006, 383).

Whereas *Country Reports 2002* stated that landmines planted by militants were "a problem" in Punjab state, as well as in Jammu and Kashmir (31 Mar. 2003, Sec. 1.g), more recent editions stated that landmines were an issue only in Jammu and Kashmir (25 Feb. 2004, Sec. 1.g; 28 Feb. 2005, Sec. 1.g). Further information on the security situation in Punjab state could not be found in *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices* for the years 2002 to 2004 inclusive. These reports focus, rather, on militant activities in Jammu and Kashmir, northeastern India and northcentral India, including the states of Andhra Pradesh, Manipur, Tripura, Bihar, Jharkhand, Orissa and West Bengal (*Country Reports 2004* 28 Feb. 2005; *Country Reports 2003* 25 Feb. 2004; *Country Reports 2002* 31 Mar. 2003).

In its report *Break the Cycle of Impunity and Torture in Punjab*, Amnesty International (AI) concluded that the "majority of the armed opposition groups are today inactive in Punjab" (20 Jan. 2003). Besides this statement, AI reports for the period 2002 to 2005 refer to Punjab state only with respect to "ongoing impunity" for those persons allegedly involved in anti-Sikh violence in Punjab state in the 1980s (16 Aug. 2005; 29 Oct. 2004; 3 Feb. 2003) and to a call for the repeal of the Indian *Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act, 1958* (4 May 2005). Amnesty International's annual reports for events covering the period 2002 to 2004 also did not comment on the security situation in Punjab, but instead discussed a National Human Rights Commission investigation into the "'disappearance' and possible extrajudicial execution by security forces of thousands of people [in Punjab] in the 1980s and early 1990s" (2003) and that Punjab police officers continued to "evade justice" for past alleged human rights violations (2005). The only information on the security situation in India contained in these annual reports concerned naxalite ("armed left-wing") groups (AI 2003) and the Maoist People's War Group (PWG) in Andhra Pradesh state (2005), the use of the death penalty for "terrorist" offences under the *Prevention of Terrorism Act (POTA)* (2003), bomb attacks in Maharashtra state (2004) and "tensions" in the states of Assam and Manipur (2005).

Similarly, Human Rights Watch (HRW) reports on Punjab state for the period 2002 to 2005 focused on the "mass secret cremations" case in Punjab state where "security forces had abducted, extrajudicially executed, and secretly cremated thousands of Sikhs in Punjab from 1984 to 1994" (1 Nov. 2005), as well as on continued impunity in Punjab for those allegedly implicated in past anti-Sikh violence (17 Dec. 2004; 30 Oct. 2004; 10 June 2003). These documents did not discuss current security issues in Punjab state. HRW annual reports for the period 2002 to 2005 also do not provide information on Punjab state. Rather, the reports focus on militant group attacks on civilians in Kashmir (Jan. 2003; Jan. 2005; Jan. 2006), northeastern (*ibid.*; Jan. 2003) and central Indian states, as well as the activities of naxalite groups (Jan. 2006).

According to the 2003 article by the ICM research associate cited above, the Punjab state "crusade against militancy" has transformed into a crusade against drug trafficking (IPCS 24 June 2003). The report explains that drug trafficking is the principal source of income for "terrorist outfits" existing in Jammu and Kashmir and other parts of India, and that relations between terrorist and mafia groups have grown closer since the mafia groups circulate drugs, arms and ammunition within and via India for terrorist groups (ibid.).

Security-Related Incidents in Punjab State

In an undated document, SATP lists the following "terrorist, insurgent and extremist groups" for Punjab state, though no indication is given as to whether they are currently active:

1. Babbar Khalsa International (BKI)
2. Khalistan Zindabad Force (KZF)
3. International Sikh Youth Federation (ISYF)
4. Khalistan Commando Force (KCF)
5. All-India Sikh Students Federation (AISSF)
6. Bhindrawala Tigers Force of Khalistan (BTFK)
7. Khalistan Liberation Army (KLA)
8. Khalistan Liberation Front (KLF)
9. Khalistan Armed Force (KAF)
10. Dashmesh Regiment
11. Khalistan Liberation Organisation (KLO)
12. Khalistan National Army (KNA) (SATP n.d.a).

Notwithstanding SATP's categorization of Punjab state as an area free from "terrorist violence" in 2002, the SATP database documents the following types of violence-related incidents in Punjab state for the period 2002 to 2005: train blasts, bomb explosions and the recovery of arms and ammunition (SATP 4 Jan. 2006). According to SATP, during the first five months of 2002, five persons were killed and thirty-nine others injured in "terrorism-related violence" in Punjab (ibid. n.d.b). SATP also reported that the following "terrorist" groups were allegedly implicated in these activities: KNA, KLF, BKI, KCF, BTFK, Lashkar-e-Toiba (LeT), Al-Umar and Pakistan Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), and that members of the following groups were arrested in Punjab state for the period 2002 to 2005: BKI, KLF, LeT, Pakistan ISI and KCF (ibid.). The SATP also documented the 2005 arrest of leaders of Dal Khalsa, plus other arrests linked to militant activity of undisclosed groups (ibid. 4 Jan. 2006), as well as the detention of alleged militants and the imprisonment of BKI militants and Sikh "terrorists" in Punjab state (ibid.).

A 24 July 2005 *Indian Express* article concluded that the BKI "poses the most serious threat to the peace of Punjab" since 1995. The article also reports on the 2005 arrest of BKI "operatives" active in Punjab and Chandigarh (ibid.). Likewise, an *India Today International* article documents the 2005 arrest of a BKI militant and "lynchpin," Jagtar Singh Hawara, who "revealed attempts by foreign-based militants to revive terrorism in [Punjab] state," and Sikh youth who were suspected members of the BKI network (*India Today International* 15 Aug. 2005). However, after reporting on these arrests in Punjab state, the *India Today International* article states "...while there are no known active militants in Punjab, the threat comes from the 500-odd extremists who had fled abroad, and of whom half-a-dozen are in Pakistan" (ibid.). The SATP draws a link between Punjab state and Pakistan, which, according to evidence obtained for SATP's 2002 assessment of Punjab state, had renewed attempts to revive terrorism in Punjab through its external intelligence agency, the Inter Services Intelligence (ISI) (SATP n.d.e).

The ICM research associate cited above wrote in 2003 that Punjab state was used "as a transit route to supply men and material to Kashmiri terrorists" and as a "safe hideout by the terrorists and their supporters" (IPCS 24 June 2003).

Government's Response

According to a 2005 *Indian Express* article, Punjab Chief Minister Amarinder Singh commented that the revival of the BKI network in Punjab state is "serious," and that the Prime Minister had been informed of the situation, and that requests had been made for assistance in obtaining intelligence on arms smuggling across the border (*Indian Express* 24 July 2005). In contrast, and despite the 2005 arrest of a BKI militant and others suspected of belonging to the BKI network, an *India Today International* article quoted Punjab Chief Minister Amarinder Singh as saying "[t]here is no groundswell of support for terrorism [in Punjab state]," and concluded that "security agencies and the Government rule out the return to militancy" in Punjab (15 Aug. 2005).

JIR articles on the security situation in India for the period 2002 to 2005 focus on the government response in the north eastern states of India such as Nagaland, Assam, Manipur and Tripura, but do not mention the government response to the security situation in Punjab state (JIR June 2004; *ibid.* Aug. 2003).

In its 2005 documentation of 28 cases of detention in Punjab state, ENSAAF, a California-based organization that fights impunity against human rights abuses in India (ENSAAF 5 Oct. 2005), concluded that the Indian police "fabricated" the revival of the terrorist threat in Punjab state and explained that the "rhetoric on the revival of terrorism increased substantially in May 2005, following two bomb blasts in Delhi theatres, and the later June arrest of Jagtar Singh Hawara, the leader of the India branch of the militant group Babbar Khalsa International" (ENSAAF Oct. 2005, 8). ENSAAF concluded that

[t]he Indian Police constructed and presented elaborate stories of thwarted militant crimes, recovered weapons, captured human bombs, and the discovery of an international network to revive militancy in Punjab. These stories, reported almost daily in the Punjab media in June and July [2005], served to conceal the escalation in human rights abuses committed in the name of national security. Further, the exaggerated stories, in direct contrast to testimonies of detainees and their families, indicate that police fabricated evidence to support criminal charges (*ibid.*, 4).

Likewise, a professor of philosophy at the University of Delhi alleges the Indian government, police, investigation agencies and media orchestrated a climate of fear in the country following the 13 December 2001 attack on the Indian parliament (ZNet 29 June 2005; Mukherji n.d.; Singh April 2005.; Vedams Books n.d.).

This Response was prepared after researching publicly accessible information currently available to the Research Directorate within time constraints. This Response is not, and does not purport to be, conclusive as to the merit of any particular claim for refugee protection. Please find below the list of additional sources consulted in researching this Information Request.

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